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Moscow's Chemical War

After 16 years of U.S. abstinence, a hesitant, reluctant Congress is getting ready to move this country back into the chemical-weapons business thanks to new evidence that the Kremlin has totally ignored the unilateral American freeze.

A high-powered presidential commission's report on the extent of Moscow's chemical war plans will hit Congress this week, just as the Soviet Union is charged in a new book with using human guinea pigs to test deadly chemical weaponry. Coincidental timing of the two events may well persuade Congress to approve a $1.3 billion chemical-weapons program.

The commission, headed by retired diplomat Walter Stoessel and including former Reagan secretary of state Alexander Haig and former Carter national security affairs adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, issues a grim warning. Failure to modernize chemical weapons, it says, will confront the United States with either "quick defeat" or "early escalation to a nuclear exchange" as the only response to Soviet chemical war tactics being perfected in Afghanistan.

The time for an American program is none too soon. The high place of chemical warfare in Soviet strategic planning is manifest in the brutal way new weapons are believed to be tested: against human beings, probably political prisoners under death sentences.

A book just off the presses, "Soviet Military Supremacy" by hard-line military experts David S. Sullivan and Quentin Crommelin Jr. makes the charge. Shortly after the invasion of Afghanistan, they write, "the Soviets conducted lethal chemical and biological tests against men and women tied to stakes in target areas at the gigantic Chikhany Chemical Test Range."

No Soviet specialist in this or past administrations whom we asked dismissed the Sullivan-Crommelin contention as either implausible or untrue. What gives the charge special interest is Sullivan's former career as a top Soviet analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency. He is now national security aide to several conservative Republican senators; Crommelin is a former Senate aide.

One part of their book was specifically verified for us by the intelligence community. They wrote that the Soviets have 14 chemical weapons production facilities "operating at full capacity" (and eight biological warfare plants). The United States has none of either. "These horrifying weapons," say Sullivan and Crommelin, can be delivered globally by 150 special intercontinental ballistic missiles developed for that purpose.

Their book, a project of the Defense and Strategic Studies Program of the University of Southern California, could influence Congress on the chemical warfare issue. But likely to be more significant is the Stoessel commission report, which shows that the long freeze on U.S. chemical weaponry imposed by President Nixon had no impact on the roaring Soviet program.

In both 1982 and 1983, it took the vote of Vice President Bush to break a deadlock in the Republican Senate and end the long U.S. abstinence on chemical weaponry, but President Reagan's proposal to start catching up with the Russians fell in the Democratic House. In 1984, fearful that election-year politics would produce lopsided votes in both Houses against ending the freeze, the administration did not press the issue.

But 1985 looks different. Even before the Stoessel commission report, the Senate Armed Services Committee approved the Reagan program by a record 15-to-3 vote. That suggests a much stronger Senate vote and at least a fighting chance in the House to replace useless stockpiles from World War II — and to develop new defenses against chemical war.

Whether the congressmen choose to ignore the human-guinea-pig charges, they cannot avoid clear evidence that Moscow has taken maximum advantage of the honorable American invitation to freeze chemical weapons. That has implications that reach beyond chemical warfare and go to the heart of the nuclear-freeze movement and the belief that fear of the United States' getting ahead is what drives Soviet weapons programs.